

## BEFORE READING

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# FISH CHEEKS

A Personal Essay by Amy Tan

### ABOUT THE STORY

**“Fish Cheeks”** tells the story of the narrator’s Chinese family. The family invites the Caucasian minister’s family to Christmas Eve dinner. The fourteen-year-old narrator is horrified. She has a crush on the minister’s son and knows that he will not appreciate her family’s traditions. Through this experience, the narrator learns something about who she really is.

### MAKE CONNECTIONS

What are some traditional holiday foods in your family? Do you think these traditions are important to follow?

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### ANALYZE LITERATURE: Sensory Details

**Sensory details** are words that appeal to the five senses. As you read the story, notice the words used to describe sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell.



# FISH CHEEKS

## A Personal Essay by Amy Tan

I fell in love with the minister's son the winter I turned fourteen. He was not Chinese, but as white as Mary in the manger. For Christmas I prayed for this blond-haired boy, Robert, and a slim new American nose.

5 When I found out that my parents had invited the minister's family over for Christmas Eve dinner, I cried. What would Robert think of our shabby *Chinese* Christmas? What would he think of our noisy *Chinese* relatives who lacked proper American manners? What terrible disappointment would he  
10 feel upon seeing not a roasted turkey and sweet potatoes but *Chinese* food?

On Christmas Eve I saw that my mother had outdone herself in creating a strange menu. She was pulling black veins out of the backs of fleshy prawns.<sup>1</sup> The kitchen was littered  
15 with **appalling** mounds of raw food: A slimy rock cod<sup>2</sup> with bulging fish eyes that pleaded not to be thrown into a pan of hot oil. Tofu, which looked like stacked wedges of rubbery white sponges. A bowl soaking dried fungus back to life. A plate of squid, their backs crisscrossed with knife markings so they  
20 resembled bicycle tires.

And then they arrived—the minister's family and all my relatives in a clamor of doorbells and **rumpled** Christmas packages. Robert grunted hello, and I pretended he was not worthy of existence.

25 Dinner threw me deeper into despair. My relatives licked the ends of their chopsticks and reached across the table, dipping them into the dozens or so plates of food. Robert and his family waited patiently for platters to be passed to them. My relatives murmured with pleasure when  
30 my mother brought out the whole steamed fish. Robert grimaced.<sup>3</sup> Then my father poked his chopsticks just below the fish eye and **plucked** out the soft meat. "Amy, your favorite," he said, offering me the tender fish cheek. I wanted to disappear.

35 At the end of the meal my father leaned back and belched loudly, thanking my mother for her fine cooking. "It's a polite

1. **prawns.** Small shellfish that resemble shrimp
2. **rock cod.** Large, soft-finned fish that lives among rocks
3. **grimaced.** Twisted one's face to show disapproval or disgust

## DURING READING

### Note the Facts

What did the narrator pray for at Christmastime?

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### Culture Note

A traditional Chinese holiday meal may include fish, tofu, pickled vegetables, and rice.

### Read Aloud

What are your impressions of the meal described in lines 12–20? Read the paragraph aloud in an appropriate tone.

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### Analyze Literature

#### Sensory Details

What word does the narrator use to describe the rock cod?

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What would that feel like?

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**ap • pall • ing** (ə pɑl' ɪŋ) *adjective*,  
inspiring disgust

**rum • pled** (rʌm' pɔld) *adjective*,  
wrinkled

**pluck** (plʌk) *verb*, pull off or out

## DURING READING

### Build Vocabulary

What did Amy's father *pluck* out?

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### Build Vocabulary

Why is it shameful to have shame for your culture according to Amy's mother?

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**as-ton-ished** (ə stä nishd) *adjective*, amazed, very surprised

**shame** (shām) *noun*, the painful feeling from knowing about something dishonorable, improper, ridiculous, etc., done by oneself or another



Chinese custom to show you are satisfied,” explained my father to our **astonished** guests. Robert was looking down at his plate with a reddened face. The minister managed to muster up a  
40 quiet burp. I was stunned into silence for the rest of the night.

### Think and Reflect

Amy was embarrassed during dinner. Would you feel the same way?

After everyone had gone, my mother said to me, “You want to be the same as American girls on the outside.” She handed me an early gift. It was a miniskirt in beige tweed. “But inside you must always be Chinese. You must be proud you are  
45 different. Your only **shame** is to have shame.”

And even though I didn't agree with her then, I knew that she understood how much I had suffered during the evening's dinner. It wasn't until many years later—long after I had gotten over my crush on Robert—that I was able to  
50 fully appreciate her lesson and the true purpose behind our particular menu. For Christmas Eve that year, she had chosen all my favorite foods. ❖



What is it like to feel different from others?  
How are people who are different treated in our society?

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**READING CHECK**

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

- How did the narrator react when she found out that the minister's family was coming to dinner?
  - She cried.
  - She was happy to see her crush.
  - She was excited to wear her new outfit.
- What did Amy's mother prepare for dinner?
  - roasted turkey and sweet potatoes
  - many different kinds of seafood
  - fish cheeks
- Who waited patiently for food to be passed around the table?
  - Amy
  - Robert and his family
  - Amy's relatives
- What does Amy's mother do to make her feel better?
  - She burped after the meal.
  - She washed all of the dishes.
  - She gave her a new skirt so that she would look like other American girls.
- What does Amy realize at the end of the story?
  - She still has a crush on Robert.
  - Her mother prepared all of her favorite foods.
  - She doesn't like traditional Chinese food.

**VOCABULARY CHECK**

Circle the letter of the correct answer.

- Why were the mounds of raw food *appalling* to Amy?
  - She knew the guests would think the food was disgusting.
  - She was very hungry and wanted to eat.
  - It was a lot of work for her mother to prepare all of that food.
- The Christmas packages were probably *rumpled* because
  - they were very expensive.
  - they were from China.
  - many relatives were carrying packages and the house was crowded.
- How did Amy's father *pluck* out the fish cheek for her?
  - Amy plucked out the fish cheek, not her father.
  - He used chopsticks and pushed below the fish eye.
  - It was prepared in the kitchen.
- What did Amy's father do that made the guests feel *astonished*?
  - He belched after the meal.
  - He turned red in the face.
  - He yelled at his daughter.
- According to Amy's mother, why shouldn't she feel *shame*?
  - She should be proud to be different.
  - Chinese people always eat seafood.
  - She is wearing a new American skirt.

**ANALYZE LITERATURE: Sensory Details**

The author writes about the Christmas Eve dinner with words that describe the tastes, touches, smells, sounds, and sights of the evening. Use sensory details to write a description of a typical holiday meal from your culture.

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## USE READING SKILLS: Analyze Text Organization

1. When did the narrator fall in love with the minister's son?

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2. When did this dinner take place?

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3. When did Amy's father belch?

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4. What did Amy's mother do after all the guests went home?

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## BUILD LANGUAGE SKILLS: Sentence Improvement

A **sentence fragment** is a phrase that does not express a complete thought. Sentence fragments are often missing a verb. Identify whether each line below is a sentence or a fragment. Rewrite the fragments to make complete sentences.

1. The table with dishes, fish, and other seafood.

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2. I was happy when my mother gave me the miniskirt.

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3. Please make this the happiest Christmas I can remember.

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4. Across the living room and down the hall.

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5. The fish and slabs of tofu on red and green plates.

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## WRITING SKILLS: Italics

Italics are used for many reasons in writing. Authors use italics for foreign words, words used as vocabulary words, or titles. In the second paragraph, the author uses italics to emphasize the word *Chinese*. Write a paragraph explaining why the author chose to italicize this word. What do the italics show us about how Amy feels about being Chinese?